Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century: Creating a National Framework

By Mr. Roy Williams

Introduction and General Considerations

The term "counterinsurgency" is, unfortunately, in the process of acquiring a range of meanings. For many, it is viewed largely in relation to specific examples of seeking control through the use of force. This narrow focus tends to result in a limited perception of the options for responding. This situation is, in part, due to the lack of any significant discussion of what is intended though use of the term. A 28-29 September 2006 meeting at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, DC, co-hosted by the Departments of Defense and State and entitled "Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century: Creating a National Framework", attempted to address these issues.

"Counterinsurgency" has been used in a variety of unrelated contexts. In addition, some insurgencies are seen as being nobler than others. In other cases, the mere existence of an insurgency demands that it be eliminated. The insurgency led by T. E. Lawrence had the active support of a great power as part of a larger military objective in addition to spawning a motion picture and various legends. On the other hand, the insurgencies in Malaya and the Philippines had to be put down as they were in opposition to a status quo deemed to be in the interests of the occupying powers.

It should also be noted that an insurgency can spring up in the absence of a host nation state as the body politic falls victim to systemic decline. Examples might include Chechnya, East Timor at one stage, and Somalia

In short, there are "good" insurgencies, not so good insurgencies (ambiguous objectives or host governments of dubious legitimacy), and bad insurgencies. In part, the determination is a matter of a political decision, but it should be noted that the nature of the counterinsurgency response can have a significant impact on turning a legitimate or not so bad insurgency into a bad insurgency with a high level of violence. Further, in raising questions on possible overlaps between the global war on terror (GWOT) and counterinsurgency tactics, the picture becomes further clouded. Terror may be described as a tool in a conflict or an act of desperation and rage independent of any long-term political objective. The use of terror as a tool fits it within a counterinsurgency strategy. Arguably therefore, the GWOT needs to be subsumed within a global counterinsurgency.

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This degree of ambiguity is not helpful. It leads, at the very least, to inconsistent evaluations of the degree of threat resulting in flawed responses; a lack of the ability to communicate on an interagency basis, and limits options for a whole-of-government response.

The question of how to respond to an insurgency has been addressed in different ways. The British success in Malay, for example, turned largely on a strategy of winning over the population and cutting the ground from under the insurgents. The use of force was not the first option. A crucial follow-on issue, in general terms, is the extent to which the ground rules for successful response become incorporated into doctrine and training. The ability to do this requires an examination and analyses of the history of events in connection with a broad-based appreciation of the circumstances of the past as they relate to the present.

We have learned that it is necessary to look closely at underlying reasons for an insurgency in relation to the expectations and concerns of the local population. These expectations often turn upon a strongly felt need for stability and security. The absence of these elements has proved to be a breeding ground for insurgency.

Civilian input into counterinsurgency response is a critical element. Insurgencies are rooted in communities and civilian actors are more likely to have access to and understanding of the genesis of an insurgency. Given this access, there still remain questions of communication— using the same terms of reference, for example—and routine opportunities to share information. A range of education and training capabilities exist, but there is little attempt being made to develop an integrated approach to education and training.

The multiplicity of actors in a COIN operation is a decidedly complicating factor. This is especially true in the absence of a clear understanding of roles and relationships.

These actors include:

> U.S. military forces
> Multinational forces (including the host nation)
> U.S. government agencies
> Other government's agencies
> Non-governmental organizations and contractors
> Host nation civil and military authorities

Within the U.S. government, both civilian and military, the understanding and shared definition of counterinsurgency is at a fundamentally fragmented stage. However, it is clear that the need for a coherent approach is growing in importance. It is increasingly apparent that an uninformed response may well have long-term negative consequences. This may be a function of either and excessive or an incomplete response.

Meeting Outline and Specific Comments

A meeting reviewing current perceptions on counterinsurgency operations took place in Washington, DC on 28-29 September. Implicit in the title of this meeting was the growing

recognition of the threat local and global insurgencies presented to national security on many levels. The title also reflected the absence of a national consensus on a U.S. approach and a concern with the apparent inability of our institutions, military and civilian, to respond in a consistent manner.

It was apparent early on that the attendees, coming from the military and a variety of civilian agencies, did not necessarily understand or view the term "counterinsurgency" in the same manner. These differing interpretations influenced much of the question and answer sessions. For some, all terrorism was insurgency; for others, terrorism was one manifestation of insurgency.   One question was how the Global War on Terror fit in this discussion on insurgency?   Other questions relate to how the United States sees itself as being part of an evolving process in its response to insurgency, or is the US simply focused on containment?

America's role has been seen as both related to a specific insurgency and central to taking the lead on insurgency as a global phenomenon. In this regard, the British see insurgency as amoeba like; a flat as opposed to vertical structure. This gives it the capacity to flow into vacuums and function with little formal structure. Maintaining the moral high ground was seen as an essential element in responding on this and other levels.

In addition, there was an acknowledgement that the US strategy towards insurgency should not necessarily be restricted to the assumptions and funding decision of any one administration or any one period or experience. The Afghanistan and Iraq models should not be viewed as the only insurgencies to be analyzed. A structure needs to be established that incorporates earlier, often overlooked, experiences such as CORDs in Vietnam. This structure should be based on the foundation of preparation through education and training and incorporation of lessons learned.

Definitions

If "'COIN' is everything, it is nothing." This was an observation made by one of the panelists. The point being that there are different kinds of insurgency initiated for a variety of different reasons and a single response strategy is not the solution. In fact, consistently responding in the same manner—say use of force—will not address the causes and probably aggravate them.

> ## Insurgency
>
> - A movement to displace governing authority
>
> - May be
>   - Political (policy-driven) or ideological (idea-driven
>   - Competition for resources (always at stake)
>   - Social, religious, or other grievances (often valid)
>
> - May or May not be armed and/or violent
>
> - Insurgents may or may not be terrorists

Counterinsurgency (COIN)

- A multi-dimensional campaign
  - Remove or marginalize insurgent leadership
  - Strengthen and reinforce legitimate governance
  - Remove popular support for insurgents by addressing root causes of alienation
  - Give population (and insurgents) a stake in government
  - Ensure tactics do not stimulate sympathy for insurgents

- 20% military, 80% non-=military
  - Main effort is political, social, economic developmental
  - Even most military COIN is non-kinetic
  - Always a long-term effort – never short, clean, or definitive

A successful insurgency depends on support of the populace. Opposing it requires occupying the moral high ground as well as understanding the motives of the insurgents. Countering insurgency cannot be treated exclusively as war fighting. This can easily push a neutral population into active opposition.

A Context for Action

One participant put counterinsurgency in the context of "finding ways to force people to work with you and make choices in their own interests." Accomplishing this requires the sort of integrated planning, leadership, and performance that can only be achieved based on an approach grounded in joint training and education. Urgent requirements at the local level are a justice system and local security services. These have been proven to be central in reestablishing confidence in communities and depriving potential or active insurgents of splitting communities.

Frequent reference was made to the inability to incorporate lessons learned. A key lesson of the Malay conflict was that the less force the better. Why has this not been better understood? This failure was seen, in part, as attributable to lack of a central point in government for maintaining continuity of experience as well as shifting perspectives attributable to changes in national leadership.

It was generally acknowledged that arrangements with coalition partners are crucial and still difficult to establish and maintain. This observation applies to NATO and other regional groupings given their structures and histories.

Observations and Conclusions

The meeting participants reached the following conclusions:

1) Reframe the GWOT as Global COIN, which will increase the chances for overall success.

2) Develop a strategy to focus complementary US government efforts on defeating insurgent activities that could give rise to terrorism and are destabilizing or destructive of peace and security.

3) Orchestrate an interagency process to evaluate laws, policies, and programs that support COIN goals—national, bilateral, regional, and global. COIN requires 20% military and 80% civilian involvement. Present resource allocations do not reflect this reality.

4) Develop deployable inter-agency, multi-functional, capacity to conduct—and to educate and train others to conduct—successful COIN.

5) Congressional support is critical as no strategy survives without resources and support for required authorities. Executive initiatives are a prerequisite, which Congress then has the option to fund.

6) A credible and representative "blue ribbon" civilian panel should be created to provide an independent message to Congress and administration political leadership on strategies for global COIN.

7) Consideration should be given to creation of a National Security University incorporating the work of the military and civilian communities.